

Art

To Show Lynching Pictures

Collection Of Propaganda
Works Has Been On
View For Several Weeks
In New York

By A. D. EMMART

ON April 1 the Maryland Institute will open an unusual exhibit and the school deserves warm commendation for its enterprise in bringing the show to Baltimore. It will be, I imagine, the occasion of some excitement in art circles and discussion generally. It is the Art Commentary on Lynching which was on view for several weeks at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York after arrangements for the place originally booked for the exhibit had suddenly been cancelled—an unpleasant and widely used tactic in dealing with uncomfortably "controversial" subjects.

I have not seen the exhibit but I know that it had a list of a couple of hundred patrons among whom were Charles Beard, Jane Cowl, George Gershwin, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Corliss Lamont, Dorothy Parker and Dr. Henry S. Canby; that Pearl Buck spoke at the preview; that Erskine Caldwell and Sherwood Anderson wrote the catalog notes and that among the paintings, prints and drawings are works from such hands as the late George Bellows, Thomas Benton, Orozco, Peggy Bacon, Reginald Marsh, John S. Curry, George Biddle and Edmund Duffy (whose two superb cartoons "Maryland My Maryland" and "California Points With Pride" are included). I also know that I shall be especially interested in this exhibit—and, I may add, in the reception it gets in Baltimore—because it will bring straight home to every gallery goer the question that more and more has been agitating the minds of artists generally in the last four or five years and that will—and I lay no claim to prophetic powers—affect them and divide them, more and more in the future.

THIS QUESTION is the problem of the content or subject matter, of art, or, if you will, of its social significance and function. The show that is coming on April 1 raises that question clearly and inescapably. The very title chosen for it indicates as much "an art commentary on" . . . these paintings and drawings are intended to say something on a subject that is primarily one of morals, society, politics, but that is not, of course, denied to the artist.

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To put it bluntly, this exhibit and the individual works it contains are propaganda—they reveal how the artist feels on a given horror of contemporary life and they are designed to awaken a similar feeling in the beholder. No one certainly, bar the precious and perverse, is going to talk "pure contemplation" or "aesthetic emotion" in connection with a set of pictures that have lynching for a theme.

With the swift descent of the school of Paris and the awakening of painters to the fact that their art was becoming a luxury algebra of unimportant decoration the problem of subject matter and of point of view, of purpose which it involves, dead for some years of adoration for the Formal X, revived. The emphasis on content found expression in many ways—in a "new" realism, in the seizure upon "native" themes, in the popularity of mural work, in the artist's interest in describing forces and current moving beneath the face of contemporary life.

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THERE is certainly no reason to believe that as a result the respect for the formal elements has decreased. An artist at work on drawing or painting that expresses a point of view is, if he is a sincere artist, just as deeply concerned with quality of his work and the techniques he employs as one who paints a still life. No doubt he experiences many new difficulties, and no doubt the vast bulk of the work that seeks to state a case, make a point will be soon forgotten. But I should not want to say that the proportion of it thus sacrificed is greater than the proportion of pictures once painted out of some striving after "universal" qualities and now quite dead and wholly forgotten.

In any event, I believe the history of art would support the contention that every major turn in the development of painting has been marked by resort to new subject matter as well as new methods and that the existing concern of the painter with a greater range of problems than the artist of the easily and middle 1920's found may not only provide American art with a fresh vigor but also, by creating new problems, call forth new formal discoveries.

However that may be, it is sure that today the issue is raised for painters and their public. And it will be well to bear it in mind when seeing the Institute show. This is work which is meant to affect, move, act.

Meantime, there is being presented at the Friends of Art House exhibits of lithographs, etchings and drawings by Raymond Creekmore and of photographs of Greece by Charles Harris Whitaker, of Washington. I have seen enough of Mr. Creekmore's work to be able to say in advance of the opening of this latest show that he is one of the Baltimore artists whose work commands an attention that it well